

OUR STORIES, FROM US, THE 'THEY'

Nick Gold talks to Lucy Duran talk about the making of *Buena Vista Social Club*

By Lucy Durán, SOAS, University of London

## Author Biography

Lucy Durán (PhD SOAS) is Senior Lecturer in African music, in the Music Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She did her BMus and MMus at King's College, London. Her main interests are West African and Cuban music, and her principal field of research is Mande music, which she has been researching on location in Mali, Gambia and Senegal since 1977, with special reference to the *jelis*, the *kora*, and women singers. Her recent research project, 'Growing into Music', [www.growingintomusic.co.uk](http://www.growingintomusic.co.uk), in collaboration with a team of specialists, uses the medium of film to document children learning musical skills and knowledge in oral traditions of India, Azerbaijan, Mali, Cuba and Venezuela.

Durán has a long professional involvement with the music industry, working as music producer, journalist and broadcaster. She was the regular presenter of BBC Radio 3's flagship world music programme **World Routes** for the duration of its lifetime on air, 2000-2013. With two Grammy nominations, she has produced more than fifteen albums, including the first two CDs by Malian *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyaté, and six albums by Grammy award-winning *kora* player Toumani Diabaté, (most recently *Toumani & Sidiki*, 2014). She is also project advisor to the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Mali.

Having devoted much of her professional life to balancing her broadcasting, recording, and academic work, Durán argues for the need to forge better links and understanding between the creative industries and academia.

## Abstract

The remarkable success of *Buena Vista Social Club*, released by the UK independent label World Circuit, has made it a focus in much of the literature on Cuban popular music of the 1990s and its representation by the world music industry. This article responds to some of the sweeping generalisations in this literature about the kinds of thought processes, strategies and motives that might have led to the production of the album. In those analyses, one voice is conspicuously absent – that of Nick Gold, the owner of World Circuit and the person who made the album happen. Here, in conversation with Lucy Durán, Gold tells the story of *Buena Vista* in his own words, revealing a tale of collaborative effort, creativity, generosity of spirit and spontaneity. The article questions the methodology of writers who feel they can speak for the views and attitudes of record producers without consulting or interviewing them directly, arguing for more communication between academics and the creative industries. In addition to giving an insider's view on how one of the best selling world music albums of all time was put together, this article is also a contribution to the budding literature on record production as a 'new academic field'.

**Keywords:** world music; Buena Vista Social Club; Nick Gold; Ry Cooder; Cuban popular music; music production

## Introduction

The starting point for this conversation with Nick Gold, executive producer of the legendary album *Buena Vista Social Club*, was a chapter in the book *Music and globalization - Critical encounters* edited by Bob W. White. Both Nick Gold (whom I have known since the mid 1980s) and I are named protagonists in the chapter, entitled 'World music producers and the Cuban frontier' (Hernández-Reguant 2011). It focuses on the production of Cuban music for the global market in the 1990s, and not surprisingly, a fair amount of discussion is devoted to the Buena Vista project (ibid pp. 125-28). Gold, owner of the independent label World Circuit, had not been aware of either the book or the chapter before I pointed it out to him. He is one of several record producers and promoters of Cuban music whose stories the author "seeks to unravel" (ibid p. 112).

Adding to the already substantial literature on world and Cuban music that references *Buena Vista Social Club*, Hernández-Reguant promises an historical tour through the kinds of engagements that foreign producers, linked to the emerging world music industry, developed with Cuban music and the Cuban socialist infrastructure since the mid- to late 1980s, leading to the smashing success of Buena Vista Social club in the world market at the end of the nineties (p. 113).

This she does, providing data about producers such as Ned Sublette and David Byrne in the USA, and Manuel Dominguez in Spain. However, there is a marked tendency to attribute 'these foreign producers of Cuban music' with identical characteristics, thoughts and motives, almost like a kind of old-school anthropological view of the 'tribe'.

There was something unique about the way in which these music producers operated in foreign lands... always in search of new frontiers, these producers were the contemporary equivalent of old colonial traders... they thrived on cultural difference, making a living as both cultural brokers and business intermediaries... in Cuba they cultivated an image of cosmopolitanism... these producers often displayed a vague sympathy for the Cuban revolutionary regime so that their business would be perceived there as friendly, but they were not so politically committed as to alienate prospective buyers at home. (p 112).

The 'world music' industry has had its fair share of criticism from academics. But I balked at the idea that 'all these producers' (though unnamed), behaved and thought uniformly. I felt uncomfortable about the underlying pejorative tone of these assumptions. Did they all act like 'old colonial traders'? Did they feign a 'vague sympathy for the Cuban regime' in order to do business on the island? Did they really all cultivate an 'image of cosmopolitanism'? Who is actually being described here?

As someone who was involved in the presentation of Cuban music in the UK during the 1980s, following closely the developments of Buena Vista and other albums produced by Nick Gold, and also as someone who wears three hats – that of academic, journalist and music producer - I do not recognise either myself or my colleague Nick Gold in these descriptions.

Hernández-Reguant appears to have conducted research for the chapter between 2007-10, when she interviewed or corresponded with a number of producers including Jumbo Vanrenen, now based in South Africa (founder of the UK label Earthworks), and Eduardo Llerenas, in Mexico (founder of the Mexican label Corason), amongst others. She did not however talk to Nick Gold. So central is he to the story of Cuban music in the 1990s, that this omission is methodologically questionable. As for the references to my work, although she and I exchanged one brief email exchange in 2010, in which I sent her some notes about my involvement with Cuban music, she appears to have relied primarily on information given her by the UK-based Latin American music scholar, the late Jan Fairley (mis-spelt Farley in her chapter).

Why were our views not elicited? I am reminded of a Malian proverb, often quoted by Mali's iconic desert musician, Ali Farka Touré: "if you shave the head of a man, he must be present".<sup>1</sup>

The remarkable economic success and worldwide exposure of Buena Vista, partly through Wim Wender's eponymous film, has made it a frequent topic in studies of world music, analysed from a number of perspectives such as nostalgia, authenticity, race, politics, and hegemony. The question is, if the album had not been such a fairy tale of rags to riches, would Nick Gold's motives have been judged in the same way, as 'financially driven'? What, for that matter, is wrong with wanting to make money, (as academics, we use our research to get us jobs, surely?)

The tendency to exclude the voices of producers of world music albums, but comment on their motives, is not unique to Hernández-Reguant. For example, another analysis of *Buena Vista Social Club*, the album, is by Finn (Finn 2009). He bases his discussion on an interview with Juan de Marcos González,

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<sup>1</sup> This was Ali's response to Bob Geldof's invitation for Ali to take part in Live 8 in 2005. The invitation came at the last minute - only two weeks before the concert. Ali turned him down, feeling that this was a last-minute bid to have more African artists on stage at an event that was aimed at raising money for Africa. Ali explained this at a press conference at the FNAC in central Lisbon, July 23, 2005, at which I was present.

the bandleader of Afro-Cuban All Stars and a principal character in the making of *Buena Vista*, whose motives he contrasts with those of producer Nick Gold (with whom he had no communication)<sup>2</sup>.

To Juan de Marcos, this project would be a celebration of traditional Cuban music. But to Nick Gold, the British music industry executive in need of a Cuban release, this was something different. Instead of a celebration of cultural identity, it was an opportunity to move production to new areas, extract new sounds, and market a new flavor of "world" music. In this meeting of musician and music industry executive, the contested terrain between music as the cultural property of its creator and as the business interest of the capitalist becomes evident. (ibid, 196)

Finn goes on to say:

While it would be dangerously oversimplifying to say that de Marcos had no economic interests in the album - he certainly did - economics took a secondary role to the primarily cultural stimulus. On the other hand, Nick Gold's primary motivation was economic, as he suggested the inclusion of Ry Cooder based on Cooder's past economic successes with world music. (ibid, 198)

Such assumptions do not take into account Gold's manifest long-time passion for Cuban music, his strong respect for and friendship with Cooder, via his collaboration with Ali Farka Touré on the Grammy award-winning album, *Talking Timbuktu*. It only gives a limited picture of how the album came about. Time to let Nick Gold tell his own story in his words?

Interestingly, Gold's story resonates strongly with the ideas of 'critical encounters' that frame Bob W. White's book, in which Hernández-Reguant's chapter appears. What happened during the recording of *Buena Vista* is a story not only of encounters, but also of some critical *mis*-encounters - thwarted events that became a catalyst for creative strategies, spontaneous music-making, eclectic musical and sonic tastes. The resulting confrontation of Cuban regional styles from the east and the west of the island almost replays the invention of urban *son* itself. The genesis of *Buena Vista* was thoroughly unpredictable. And that may well account for its success.

"I love things that come together like that", said Nick in an interview back in 2001, talking about *Buena Vista Social Club* with UK jazz journalist John Fordham. (Nick has been interviewed many times by music journalists, even if not by academics). "What comes out of it is always different from the way you

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Gold had been completely unaware of Finn's article, and adds the following comment: 'I think it's outrageous how he attributes (wrong) motivations to me – again, as you mention, without verifying by talking to me'. Personal communication, 23.4.14

imagined. That's why we shouldn't fear homogenised corporate-culture so much. This kind of music-making is too strong to be destroyed."<sup>3</sup>

One conclusion, in the context of such academic analysis, is that we need more critical encounters between the creative industries and academics. Both voices need to be heard, in conversation, discussing processes of production. And so in late March this year, I spent an afternoon talking to Nick Gold about ideas and events that led him to the EGREM<sup>4</sup> first-floor studio in central Havana, Cuba, March 1996 to record Buena Vista Social Club, probably the best selling album of Cuban music ever.

## The Background

A few words follow about how both Nick and I got involved in promoting and presenting Cuban music in the 1980s and '90s. All references to 'the chapter' are Hernández-Reguant 2011.

Cuban music has been a lifetime passion for me; I grew up listening and dancing to it. My father was a Spanish musician, in exile after the Spanish Civil War, with a strong interest in folk and popular music, and my parents had lived in Cuba in the early 1940s. I studied music at King's College London University, and after a chance encounter with the kora in the mid 1970s, while working for Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, I immersed myself in West African music. Cuban music remained a strong personal interest. I first went to Cuba in 1987, where I was taken around the island by Marina Rodríguez of CIDMUC<sup>5</sup> and exposed to many different kinds of music including the popular bands of the time (Los Van Van, La Revé, etc). Part of my reason for going was to meet Celina González, the 'queen of Cuban country music' (*música campesina*) and to invite her to perform in the UK. I had long been a great fan of her 1950s recordings with her husband Reutilio Domínguez.

Back in the early 1980s in London, there were few opportunities to hear any kind of Latin music, so there was only one thing to do – create a circuit for it. That was one of the impetuses behind co-founding the charity Arts Worldwide, which was funded by a grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain (as it was then). I was on the board of directors for several years and played a role in selecting the musics represented. The idea was to organise tours around UK arts venues, by musicians from around the world who had strong local followings but were little known outside their home ground<sup>6</sup>. The first such group that we toured was Mhuri Yekwa Rwizi from Zimbabwe, the *mbira* group featured in Paul Berliner's seminal book, *The Soul of Mbira* (1979). Paul Berliner was also part of the tour. Many other remarkable projects followed, including music from

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/apr/10/artsfeatures1> consulted on April 17, 2014

<sup>4</sup> EGREM stands for Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales, the Cuban national recording and music publishing enterprise.

<sup>5</sup> Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música Cubana, a government agency based in Havana

<sup>6</sup> See the World Circuit website for more information about the history of the company <http://www.worldcircuit.co.uk/#About> (consulted 20.4.2014)

Venezuela, Yemen, Sudan, Mali (that was the first time Toumani Diabaté came to the UK, in 1987) and Rajasthan.

In 1986, Anne Hunt and Mary Farquharson, director and co-founder of Arts Worldwide, respectively, created a record label, World Circuit, and recruited the young Nick Gold to develop it. The idea was initially to release music by the artists being toured. One of its first releases, in 1987, was *Fiesta Guajira*, licenced from Cuba's EGREM, featuring Celina González and a stellar *música campesina* band, most of whom came to the UK with her in 1988 for their first UK tour. This album and tour proved to be one of the starting points for the *Buena Vista Social Club* project.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, Nick Gold and I had uncannily similar musical taste, though we came about it in totally different ways. Nick grew up in London listening to all kinds of jazz. His father, British film director Jack Gold (whose titles include such distinguished films as *The Naked Civil Servant*), was a jazz aficionado. Nick studied African history at Sussex University – an early indication of his serious interest in Africa – and after graduating, he took on a number of jobs including working for Mole Jazz, an iconic jazz record shop in north London. Nick fell in love with Cuban music, by listening to recordings of the likes of Arsenio Rodriguez and Abelardo Barroso, and also with West African bands from the 1970s, such as Orchestra Baobab from Senegal (whose music he later went on to release).

In 1988, Nick released the first of many albums by the great Malian singer-guitarist Ali Farka Touré (who was most definitely not, as stated by Hernández-Reguant, a kora player<sup>7</sup>). Ali, a farmer from the north of Mali, began touring with Arts Worldwide in 1987. With his charismatic stage presence, eccentric personality, charm, and unique style that had strong resonances with the Delta blues, Ali soon became something of a cult figure. American guitarist Ry Cooder heard his music and wanted to meet him. In 1992, they finally met up in London – a critical encounter if ever there was one. Ali – not someone who was in the slightest impressed by stardom – felt an affinity with Ry. Ali chose to show his special regard for Ry by giving him the very first instrument he had ever made, the one string fiddle *djerkel*. In 1993 they recorded an album together, *Talking Timbuktu*, which went on to be awarded a Grammy in 1994, and created a strong trusting relationship between Ali Farka, Ry Cooder, and Nick Gold.

In the same year, Nick released an album by Cuban revival *son* group, Sierra Maestra, led by Juan de Marcos González, who was to play a crucial role in Buena Vista Social Club.

We pick up the story from here.

## The conversation.

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<sup>7</sup> Hernández-Reguant wrongly describes Ali Farka Touré as a 'famous Malian kora player' (Hernández-Reguant 2011: 125). The author cites *Talking Timbuktu*, his World Circuit album with Ry Cooder, as evidence, though there is no kora on that album. This is quite a serious error from someone who writes about world music. Touré was a Sonrai, far removed from the culture of the kora, which is an instrument of Mande griots. He did record two albums for World Circuit in duet with kora player Toumani Diabaté, one of which won a Grammy award, but Touré himself never touched a kora.

Lucy Duran (LD) and Nick Gold (NG) in conversation, 21 march 2014, in my living room in north London. All references to 'the chapter' are to Hernández-Reguant 2011.

LD. Nick, I wanted to get your own story of *Buena Vista*, to set the record straight about what actually happened and why. Some academic writing seems to guess at what makes you tick and why you did what you did, without ever having talked to you. It's not like you're exactly inaccessible, being in London!

Personally I find it slightly ironic that ethnomusicologists go to great lengths to record the music and discourse of people in remote locations, but don't seem to feel it's necessary to do the same, when writing about music producers on home ground.

That's why I thought I would start our conversation by quoting Ali Farka's wonderful proverb, 'If you shave the head of a person, he must be present'.

NG (laughs). It's a brilliant proverb!

LD. In the Hernández-Reguant chapter, it says that the producers of Cuban music in the 1980s and 90s, presumably including you, were always 'in search of new frontiers'. Were you in search of 'new frontiers'? I think you were kind of in search of old frontiers.

NG. I was in search of very specific things that I liked. I wasn't looking for frontiers and some random potential.

LD [reads from the chapter, p. 113] 'they relied on their privilege as foreigners in Cuba during the Special Period... when a double economy kept most Cubans in dire poverty... At the same time they prided themselves on their insider knowledge.'

So Nick - did you pride yourself on your insider knowledge? As for me, I didn't think I had 'insider' knowledge - but I knew that I knew something about Cuban music.

NG. (laughs). For me even less, I knew that I knew someone who knew something about Cuban music.

LD. There's no doubt that Cuban music suddenly had a lot of exposure in the UK during the mid to late 1980s.<sup>8</sup> But some of the Cuban artists mentioned in the chapter (p. 116), who came to the UK, were really not part of the 'world music' scene. They didn't 'share the festival stage' with African bands as claimed. I know this well, because I was behind a lot of those events. For example the rumba group Los Muñequitos, Síntesis, Carlos Embale with the Septeto Nacional, came over for the *Suave Suave* festival at the ICA (London's Institute of Contemporary Arts) in 1989. It wasn't a world music venue at all, it put on

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<sup>8</sup> The work of Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London, who brought over such groups as Irakere for residencies, and also record producer Joe Boyd, who released Silvio Rodríguez' *Días y flores* on his label Hannibal, amongst other things, should be mentioned.



contemporary music and theatre. That was curated by Robert Wisdom, who ran the ICA theatre then.

Bob loved Cuban music, especially the more traditional styles like rumba. He and I went to Cuba in April 1989 to negotiate the Cuban artists' visit with ARTEX, the Cuban agency [see Fairley 2004]. The only way we could get ARTEX to agree to let Los Muñequitos come to London – they had so far never been allowed out of the country and they were our absolute priority as the first professional rumba group – was by agreeing to bring over Síntesis as well (a Cuban experimental band that played rock versions of *santería* songs). But this was not for a world music audience.

NG. I always had problems with the term 'world music'... all this interest in Cuban music was happening around the time that the term was 'invented', but it doesn't mean it was seen or promoted as world music.

LD. La Orquesta Revé played at WOMAD and a few other UK festivals in 1989. But I'd say that British audiences didn't really understand Revé's music. It was maybe a bit too hard-edged for them. Some of the DJs and journalists who were building up the world music scene then were not enamoured of Cuban music. They found it too 'cabaret' – something about the horn section. That made the success of the Celina Gonzalez tour with Arts Worldwide even more exceptional.

NG. Celina Gonzalez – yes, she was the pioneer of Cuban music in the UK during the 1980s. We licenced her album *Fiesta guajira* – just when I started with World Circuit – and then we toured her with her band, and she was a huge success. And that's how I met Barbarito [Torres, virtuoso *laúd* player; not Barbarito Diez, mistakenly cited by Hernández-Reguant's chapter as being a member of *Buena Vista*<sup>9</sup>], – an exceptional musician. I absolutely wanted him to be on the album that turned into *Buena Vista*.

LD. Do you remember how surprised Celina was – even the small Cuban community living in the UK were shocked by how popular her shows were – the Cubans said that at home in Cuba they would never have danced to *música campesina*, but they dancing their hearts out to her music. I wouldn't say the audiences that came to see her were 'world music' audiences. (Celina had recently been invited to do a gig in Colombia, where she discovered she had a huge following, and there was a large community of Colombians in the UK who came to see her.

NG. Celina was supposed to be on *Buena Vista* as well. I asked her to be part of it. But she threw the shells [divination in Santería] before we got there, asking about it, and they said no. Then we were in Cuba, and I said, 'Marcos [Juan de

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<sup>9</sup> The chapter (p.125) erroneously names the *laúd* player on Buena Vista as Barbarito Diez (1909-95). Barbarito Diez was an Afro-Cuban singer of *danzón* and *bolero*, who died the year before the BVSC album was recorded. He was the one known in West Africa during the years of the Cuban music boom (see H-R's footnote 6). However, it was another Barbarito – Barbarito Torres (b. 1956) – who plays *laúd* on *Buena Vista Social Club*. As stated earlier, Gold had met him when he toured the UK as part of Celina González's band. As it turns out, he was a key musician on the project from its inception, as shall be seen below.

Marcos] can you ask her again?' He said, 'oh alright, but the shells...' and the shells again said no.

LD. oh no... I didn't know that story. What a shame! Of course, Celina was deeply religious, a practitioner of *santería*...

So, can I ask you to clarify, since there seems to be some confusion about this – who was the producer of *Buena Vista*?

NG. The artistic producer was Ry [Cooder]. But there's a bit of blur in there.

LD. You must have had some input...?

NG. well I did, yes...

Originally, it was supposed to be a Mali-Cuba collaboration. The idea was to bring [Malian guitarist] Djelimady Tounkara, and [*ngoni* player] Bassekou Kouyaté<sup>10</sup> to Cuba, to work with a group of Cubans, featuring Eliades Ochoa and Barbarito [Torres]. And Juan de Marcos [of Sierra Maestra] was going to help us put together the rhythm section, meant to be Orlando Cachaito Lopez's rhythm, plus part of the rhythm section from Sierra Maestra. So that was it, at the beginning. And the repertoire I was sending back and forth with Marcos, before I even started talking to Ry about it, was all very 'eastern'. You know, the kind of music from *oriente*, the eastern side of Cuba.

We actually called it 'the eastern album' for ages. Because we also had a 'Havana' project which later became the album called *A toda Cuba le gusta*, by the Afro-Cuban All Stars.

LD. How did you first come across Eliades Ochoa?

NG. Here! Just over there, in your living room.

LD. Oh... I forgot about that encounter! I invited Eliades, who came with Eduardo Llerenas, to my house, and you were also here and so was Juan de Marcos González (whom I knew well from the early Sierra Maestra days in the UK). The germ of the idea for the album came out of that.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bassekou Kouyaté, who has since gone on to become one of the most successful touring artists of West Africa, is a virtuoso performer on the *ngoni*, the Mande griot lute. Nick Gold first met him through kora player Toumani Diabate as part of the Symmetric Trio.

<sup>11</sup> Juan de Marcos describes this encounter when I interviewed him in 2007 at the EGREM studio for the (now defunct) BBC Radio 3 radio programme, World Routes. It is archived and can be listened to online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007npls>



Juan de Marcos González with Lucy Durán at the EGREM studios, 2007, depicting the piano played by Rubén González. Photo: James Parkin. By permission

NG. I'll tell you how I actually first came across Eliades.

When I very first went to Cuba with Nicky (my wife) on holiday in 1987 or thereabouts, EGREM heard that we were there, because it was just after we'd done the Celina record. They invited us to the offices, and we listened to loads of tapes at EGREM, one of which was Níco Saquito's album. Which I fell in love with, and licenced as 'Goodbye Mr Cat'. Eliades was one of the lead singers and guitarists on it. But I didn't know that till I met him here in your living room, as I was telling him about it. So that's what made me want to include Eliades, because I loved his sound on 'Goodbye Mr Cat'.

LD. Why the interest in eastern Cuban music?

NG. A lot of the music I'd heard in Senegal and Mali was influenced by the eastern style of Cuban music. The styles worked well together, in songs like *El Carretero* by people like Guillermo Portabales, - I loved that song and that's why it's on *Buena Vista*.

LD. that's in fact the title of the Portabales album you released.

NG. Yes, I licenced it later on (from a Puerto Rican company)...

So that was the sort of record we were looking at. A Portabales type of sound, but we were going to get Djelimady and Bassekou to do their thing.

At some point I contacted Ry [Cooder] and asked if he was interested in taking part, and he immediately said yes. And so we carried on swapping repertoire, now between all three of us - Juan de Marcos, myself and Ry.

So the idea was to make two records. One was the 'eastern' one, the collaboration with Mali. The other, Marcos had proposed to me. He knew I loved Arsenio Rodríguez's music from when World Circuit recorded the first Sierra Maestra album, *Dundumbanza*, 'cause we did a lot of Arsenio's compositions on it (including the title track). And Marcos was saying, a lot of those musicians who played Arsenio's music are still alive and can still play (like the pianist Rubén González who was in Arsenio's band in the 1940s).

So Marcos said, let's make that record too, and that's where Marcos came up with this idea of the three generational band. They didn't have a name, but later on, I called the band 'Afro-Cuban All Stars'. (The album was released as *A toda Cuba le gusta*).

LD – so that was the 'Havana' one... how did you first come across Arsenio's music, was it through Sierra Maestra?

NG – no, I can't remember when it was exactly. Maybe when I was working at Mole Jazz, doing old jazz. As *soon* as I got to World Circuit I tried to license Arsenio's old 1940s tracks from BMG. But it was very difficult...

So Marcos was fixing the repertoire for the 'Havana' album, and he said, I can book the studio, I can organise all the musicians.

Marcos is the kind of person you know you can rely on to get things done. So we booked two weeks in the EGREM studio - the big one upstairs on the first floor. I got to Cuba with Jerry Boys [sound engineer] in March 1996, and in the first week we just recorded the 'Havana' album. (Ry wasn't there yet - he was due in the following week, because he was only involved in the 'eastern' album.)

It was a huge band of musicians representing three generations. Straight away I fell in love with Rubén - as soon as we got into the studio. He was the pianist on the album, that's when I met him. He was always the first to get to the EGREM studio, and the last to leave!

LD. He was 77 years old then. You sent me to interview him at his home in Havana, when I was there in May of that same year. He was very forthcoming about his history as a pianist, with Arsenio Rodríguez and later Enrique Jorrín, and he was very excited about having a solo album for World Circuit coming out, and done the other recordings too.

Afterwards lots of people told me I was lucky to have interviewed Rubén at home, because if there was a piano around, apparently he wouldn't say a word, just play.<sup>12</sup>

NG. I remember on the first or second day doing the Havana album, Ry phoned me up. He'd been to Cuba twice before, once on a trip to do with the jazz festival, and another trip a few months before we went out, with the Chieftains. That's when Ry had met Cachaito and Omara Portuondo. So I remember Ry phoning up and saying, 'you've *got* to find this guy. I'm listening to this *Estrellas de Areíto* album, and there's a pianist on it, and every time he plays, someone shouts "Rubén, Rubén!" Nick, you've *got* to find this guy!' and I said, 'I'm standing right next to him!'

Marcos had assembled this band – the one that became Afro-Cuban All Stars. It featured Orlando 'Cachaito' López on acoustic bass, Rubén on piano, Guajiro Mirabal on trumpet, Angá Díaz on congas, Juan de Marcos' brother Carlos González on bongos, and the rhythm section from Sierra Maestra. And a kid on timbales who I never heard again, Julian Oviedo who was 12 then, I think. And Marcos brought in some great old singers – like Raul Planas and Puntillita.

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<sup>12</sup> The interview was published on the sleeve notes to the World Circuit album, *Introducing Rubén González*.

Marcos himself played tres, and there was a three-trumpet section. Basically it was a classic *conjunto* orchestra.

First they recorded the rhythm section on its own, then the horn section, and I thought, we have an album just with this! Then we recorded the singers... (Later, that rhythm section was the inspiration for the opening of the Cachaíto solo album [*Cachaíto on World Circuit*].)

Marcos was artistic director of the 'Havana' album. Everything was written, sorted, rehearsed, planned. He'd had to rehearse Rubén on piano with Cachaíto for months before, because Rubén hadn't been playing for a long time. (His own piano at home had been eaten by woodworm).

LD. So what about the 'eastern' album?

NG. Well, you know the story about the Malians... to recap: just before we left for Cuba, the passports of the two Malian musicians, Djelimady and Bassekou, who were supposed to be coming, got lost. They had been sent to the Cuban embassy in Burkina Faso to have their visas stamped in. But the passports vanished. That was only a few days before the whole thing was due to happen. So then it was clear they wouldn't make it to Cuba.

LD. Yes, I was actually in Mali at the time when the passports got lost. I remember that Bassekou was doing his nut! He wanted so badly to go to Cuba. He thought this was the chance of a lifetime. Djelimady – that was another story, because just around then a wealthy patron of Malian music, Babani Sissoko, had turned up, and had actually given Djelimady a bar of gold, so he wasn't that bothered about not going to Cuba. Though later on, he regretted it terribly.

NG. So I told Ry that the Malians weren't coming, but we agreed, let's do the 'eastern' album anyway. During the Afro-Cuban All-Stars recording, I realised very quickly that we needed a backup plan. Eliades and Barbarito were arriving in a few days, and I asked Marcos, 'can we keep Guajiro, Rubén, and Puntillita for the next album?'

Ry arrived on the last day of the Afro-Cuban All Stars album, and Eliades and Barbarito had arrived.

So on the first day with Ry of working on the second album, the 'eastern' one, Cachaíto and Rubén were still there but the rhythm section was thinned out massively. There was no conga player or timbales. Because initially the idea was to make a *septeto* type of album. For a while it was called the 'Cuban country album' as well as the 'eastern' album.

I remember walking that day around the studio. There was Rubén, Cachao, Puntillita, and they were just jamming. There was a very 'up' atmosphere, because they'd just finished recording the other album. And then the tape machine in the studio broke, so we couldn't record anything. That relaxed the atmosphere even more. No recording, just having fun.

Ry asked – and this had been mooted before he got there – if we could find Compay Segundo. He'd been tipped off about Compay by someone. So we went and got Compay in, who promptly said he couldn't record, 'cause he'd just signed a contract with Warner Brothers, Spain. He was ninety or something! He was very nervous about doing anything till we sorted it out. There was no email or

mobile phones then! But we got the permission from Warner, and the very first thing we recorded once the tape machine was fixed was *Chan Chan* – the opening track on the album.

Ry insisted on having two microphones placed way up high near the ceiling because he loved the sound of that big studio room upstairs at EGREM in Central Havana. Traditionally the Cubans preferred using the downstairs smaller studio because you could get better separation – that's exactly what we *didn't* want. And that did become a huge part of the album - the sound of it. Eventually, the sound of that record is from those two microphones. We added to the mix a tiny bit of the close-up microphones. There's hardly any added reverb. Everyone was sat really close together. So there's a real sense of communication. Jerry recorded it, but it was Ry who wanted it like that.



Photo depicting the configuration of musicians while recording the album *Buena Vista Social Club*, in the EGREM studio, 1996. Ry Cooder is sitting (left) with guitar. Standing at the back, Compay Segundo (holding bass) and Juan de Marcos González (wearing hat). Note the two tall microphone stands. Photo: Susan Titelman (by permission).

LD. What about the repertoire?

NG. They had a huge repertoire as well, all of them – contributing their own songs. It was incredibly exciting. We chose the songs as we went along. We started with a list but we kept diverting from it, because the musicians just did new stuff all the time. Ry had a little dictaphone and he'd walk around listening in and recording the jamming sessions, and the next day would play it back and say, 'what's that?' 'Got to do that one!'

LD. what a great way of working!

NG. Yeh, it was very fast and very spontaneous! Ry went to Rubén and played a recording he'd done of him the day before, and said, 'what was that?' And it would have been the track *Buena Vista*. And we'd just go ahead and record it.

LD. When did the singer Ibrahim Ferrer come along?

NG. We were recording *Dos gardenias*. Ry said, can we find someone with a softer voice, because Puntillita was a great singer but his tone was too harsh. And Marcos just went, 'I know the guy' and left the studio. Two hours later he came back with Ibrahim Ferrer.

So Ibrahim walked into the studio and he saw Eliades Ochoa - they knew each other from Santiago where they were both from. Eliades looked up and straight away started playing *Candela*, Ibrahim's tune. I'm remembering from hindsight, but the way things were happening, we would have just said, ok let's put that track down. And Marcos conducted. He's a brilliant conductor.

Even without the Africans, the 'eastern' album was a weird combination of instruments and styles. Because there was the Santiago contingent, the country sound, which was very strong - Eliades, Ibrahim and Compay Segundo - but then put Rubén into that, and it was quite an unusual combination.

LD. Well in a way that's the strength of that album, because it has both western and eastern Cuban styles mixed together.

NG. It was incredibly exciting. We'd record all day, and then the musicians would go home - except Rubén who'd carry on playing! - and we'd listen back to what we'd just recorded, and think... wow!!! it's amazing!!!

Omara got involved when Ry spotted her downstairs at EGREM, he looked over the balcony and invited her to come up. She said, 'but I can't record with you, I'm flying to Vietnam tonight.' So it really was, 'what can you do in these few minutes? A duet with Compay Segundo?' I can't remember which one of them suggested *Veinte años*. That's the only track she's on.

We were six or seven days in the studio. But I have to say - I was praying for it to finish, so that I'd have time left over in the studio to record an album with Rubén. Which we did.





left to right: Ry Cooder, Ibrahim Ferrer, Nick Gold, Rubén González, in the EGREM studios 1996. Photo: Susan Titelman (by permission). Nick Gold's own caption to this photo is 'With my heroes!'.

LD. You released all three albums recorded during that session - *Afro-Cuban All Stars*, *Buena Vista Social Club*, and *Introducing Rubén González* - out in 1996, as part of a publicity strategy, which I thought was very clever. You put a lot of effort into the sleeve notes and photos.

NG. Actually we staggered the releases a few months apart from one another – first *Afro-Cuban All Stars*, then *Introducing Rubén González*, then *Buena Vista Social Club*. This was done so each album could get a moment of its own rather than being swamped by each other or overshadowed by *Buena Vista*. There's a line in the Hernández-Reguant's chapter that says 'world music has a bias against recognizing authorship in traditional music'. In fact in the booklet of *Buena Vista Social Club*, as we finally called the 'eastern' album, we went to great pains to show who were the composers. Ry was quite big on that – about songwriters. Of course Compay Segundo had written quite a few of the songs, and he was actually there with us. I remember Ry being in awe of Compay. When you listen to his songs, they were just brilliant. Just the way he called himself 'Compay Segundo' was hilarious.

LD. Well that's because he was part of the Duo Los Compadres ('the god-brothers') who recorded many hits in Santiago de Cuba in the 1950s. I used to listen to them a lot.

NG. OK, but to go on calling yourself that for the rest of your career! The man had great humour!



LD. yes, the second *compadre* – not even the first one! In fact I met the ‘first’ *compadre*, the older one - Lorenzo Hierrenzuelo, in Havana in 1987. Revé introduced me to him. He was very ancient and frail then – and blind.

NG. Wow, that’s like meeting Miguel Matamoros or something. That’s how it was to meet Compay. He loved to say ‘*incorrecto...*’ in a booming voice, and Ry would laugh and say, ‘oh we don’t want *incorrecto!*’

LD. One more thing we need to touch on. It’s true that BV sold millions of copies. But did you have any idea beforehand that it would be so successful? In the Hernández-Reguant chapter p. 125, it says that even before *Buena Vista*, you already you ‘knew that Cuban music could have far greater sales’ than previously imagined, and as support for this statement, it cites Gloria Estefan’s album *Mi Tierra (my land)* as topping the charts in the UK which she then toured, with the London Symphony Orchestra.

NG. I’m afraid that is totally irrelevant, I was unaware of her coming to London, and I didn’t go to that show. Did you?

LD. No. I don’t remember even hearing about it.

NG. But the implication is that I went there to make money knowing there was money to be made, which I didn’t. I went there because I thought it would be nice to have a Portabales type of record, with Bassekou Kouyaté on it playing *ngoni* ... (laughs). In all innocence!

So I went to make a record that I thought I would love if it existed.

No, I could not have imagined that the album we were about to record would sell millions of copies, but I have to say, as we listened back we knew it was a hell of an album.

Hernández-Reguant and Finn both make it look like we had worked out and predicted the whole thing even down to the feature film. Nothing would have been further from our imagination when we went to make the album. Why wouldn’t someone contact me to ask me and get some direct quotes?

LD. Any final response to the assumption by these authors that you were just out to make money when you dreamt up the project?

NG. As for ‘thinking I was going to make money’. I remember when we started to record Rubén’s solo album (which hadn’t been a part of the original plan at all) and I called to the office in London and explained what I was doing, they thought I’d gone mad, that I wasn’t taking the financial aspect into consideration at all. But if you’d been there with Rubén and heard his beautiful playing, you’d have known that this was something that had to be done.

LD. So it was quite the opposite. You were spending money you didn’t have, because you believed in the music.

NG. It's well known in the music business that you sign a new band for three albums. You invest the money in the first one, and start to recoup by the third album.

Was that a probable scenario in my head, working with musicians who were already in their seventies upwards?

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